





The Christian Social Union

BISHOP LATIMER AS A CHRISTIAN SOCIALIST

BY THE RIGHT REV.
CHARLES GORE
D.D., LORD BISHOP OF
BIRMINGHAM

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The Christian Social Union.

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THIS Union consists of Members of the Church of England who have the following objects at heart:—

1. To claim for the Christian law the ultimate authority to rule social practice.
2. To study in common how to apply the moral truths and principles of Christianity to the social and economic difficulties of the present time.
3. To present Christ in practical life as the living Master and King, the enemy of wrong and selfishness, the power of righteousness and love.

Members are expected to pray for the well-being of the Union at Holy Communion, more particularly on or about the following days:—

The Feast of the Epiphany.

The Feast of the Ascension.

The Feast of St. Michael and All Angels.

Further information may be had on application to the Hon. Secretary—

The Rev. J. CARTER,

Pusey House, Oxford.

BISHOP LATIMER

AS A

CHRISTIAN SOCIALIST.¹

“A preacher of righteousness.”—2 Pet. ii. 5.

THE dedication of your new church to Hugh Latimer, one of the greatest and best of the Bishops of Worcester, was a settled thing before I became bishop ; but I accept the arrangement with gratitude, if for no other reason than because it has given me a fresh opportunity to engrave upon my own mind the image of this great preacher of righteousness, this great and vigorous lover of God's people. And on this day of the consecration of Bishop Latimer's Church I would do my best to make his name a living thing in your hearts and minds.

He was born about 1490 at Thurcaston, in Leicestershire, the son of a small yeoman, or tenant-farmer, who brought up his family in godliness and honesty ; made enough out of his land to keep his family and some half-dozen men ; to marry his six daughters with a small portion ; to send his sharp-witted son to school and then to Cambridge (for the educational ladder was a great reality in those days in England) ; and all the while to “keep hospitality for his poor neighbours ” and “to give some alms to the poor.” Altogether a noble, industrious, and religious figure is this of Hugh Latimer the elder as his famous son portrays him for us. His son grew up to see English agriculture decay, and the class to which

¹ Preached at the Consecration of the Bishop Latimer Church, July 23, 1904.

he had belonged extinguished or impoverished ; partly through the suppression of the monastic cultivators, partly under the pressure of the wool trade, which led to the substitution of pasture for agriculture, to the unjust enclosure of lands formerly held in common, and to the rack-renting of the farms, largely such as had been monastic property and had passed into less merciful hands :

"Whereas," says Latimer, "there have been a great many householders and inhabitants there is now but a shepherd and his dog." "All such proceedings do intend plainly to make the yeomanry slavery." "He that now hath my father's farm payeth £16 a year (four times the former rent), and is not able to do anything for his prince, for himself, nor for his children, nor to give a cup of drink to the poor."

What we should call Latimer's "ardent socialism" (for he was a prince of Christian socialists) was due in great measure to the thoughts bred in his keen mind by the depopulation of the country districts, and the poverty and misery of the peasantry. Once more, the suppression of the schools, which had been largely connected with guilds and chantries and monasteries, broke down the educational ladder: "Charity is waxen cold," cries Latimer; "none helps the scholar nor yet the poor. And in those days, what did they when they helped the scholar? They maintained them who were very Papists, and professed the Pope's doctrine; and now that the knowledge of God's Word is brought to light and many earnestly labour and study to set it forth, now hardly any man helps to maintain them." "If ye bring it to pass that the yeomanry be not able to put their sons to school (as indeed Universities do wondrously decay already), and that they be not able to marry their daughters to the avoiding of whoredom, I say, ye pluck salvation from the people and utterly destroy this realm.

For by yeomen's sons the faith of Christ is and hath been maintained chiefly. Is this realm taught by rich men's sons? No, no, read the Chronicles. Ye shall find sometime noblemen's sons which have been unpreaching bishops and prelates ; but ye shall find none of them learned men." "The Commons be utterly undone, whose bitter cry ascendeth up to the ears of the God of Sabaoth."

Such were the abiding social judgements of Latimer. As for his religious beliefs, he remained at Cambridge till he was thirty—"as obstinate a Papist as was any in England." Then (as he says) he began to "smell the Word of God," first through Thomas Bilney (a martyr for the reformed opinions before Latimer became a bishop), who came to him to make his confession. And "by his confession I learned more than before in many years." After that he was with increasing sympathies on the side of the new learning, and his extraordinary power in preaching and force of character made him a leader, the most powerful in the land. He was a Protestant of the older type, before Calvin's influence was felt. He was strongly "anti-Calvinist," as we should say. "Christ shed as much blood for Judas as He did for Peter." "We may be in the book (of life) one time, and afterwards, when we forget God and His word, we come out of that book: that is, out of Christ, which is the book." "God would have all men to be saved ; His salvation is sufficient to save all mankind, but we are so wicked in ourselves that we refuse the same."

So he reiterates. In fact, Latimer's strong moral sense gave him little taste for speculation on "the decrees." Moreover, he had no faculty for systematic theology. What he rebelled against in the unreformed theology was chiefly two things. First were the practical abuses. He saw men all around him "tithing mint and anise and

cummin, and neglecting the weightier matters of the law "—that is, he saw them occupied with acquiring merits by what were called "voluntary works," works over and above the necessary duties of the Christian—the adorning of churches, the going on pilgrimages, the decoration of images, the "setting up of candles," and neglecting the plain duties of moral reformation and works of mercy: "The images are to be clad in silk garments, and those also laden with precious gems and jewels; as who should say that no cost can be too great; whereas in the meantime we see Christ's faithful and lively images, bought with no less price than His most precious blood (Alas! alas!) to be a-hungred, a-thirst, a-cold, and to be in darkness, wrapped in all wretchedness, yea to lie there till death take away their miseries."

He saw religion converted, as it were, into a vast system of insurance against purgatory. Christians were occupied in providing for their own and others' souls in purgatory, instead of becoming better men and women here and now. He saw a vast system of money-getting, a gigantic traffic connected with what he called the "purgatory pick purse," and multitudes of clergy ordained as "massing priests" who did not preach or teach or labour to make men better. He saw the bishops absent from their dioceses, giving themselves to affairs of State and to the luxuries of the world; "unpreaching prelates," whom he seeks to put to shame by his famous reminder that "the devil is never out of his diocese"; he "always applieth his business."

The whole organization of the unreformed Church seemed to Latimer to be directed to a wrong end, to something quite different from Christ's kingdom. Thus he was forced into violent reaction against the whole system. He is no doubt indiscriminating and harsh in his language. He does not seek to discover the element

of truth which lay behind the corruptions. But that which he was striving for was the kingdom of righteousness. What he desired was that all men should see that the Christian religion was nothing else than the becoming like Christ.

The other conspicuous feature in his Protestantism was his desire to go back to a simple gospel of divine love: that God had sent His Son to be the saviour of the world; that He had won for us and for all men the forgiveness of our sins; that if we would have faith in Him our sins were forgiven; we had neither need nor power to purchase salvation by accumulation of merits; it remained for us simply to accept the great salvation, to repent of our sins, to make restitution for wrong done, and then, rejoicing in the light of the face of Christ, who had reconciled us to God, to go on our way to make His kingdom of righteousness and brotherly love prevail. Behind an accumulated mass of traditions Latimer wanted to go back to the religion of the Bible, in which his soul recognized and welcomed a revelation of God to his moral nature—the revelation of a God of righteousness, of justice, and of love. And it must be said that with all his repudiation of human merits, and his insistence upon the freedom of divine grace and forgiveness, he is in no danger of condoning moral laxity. He is always insisting upon the requirement of the moral law, on the reality of God's moral judgment, on the restoration of ecclesiastical discipline and excommunication for moral offences; and to the necessity of repentance he never wearies of adding the necessity of restitution of goods unjustly gotten, and the righting of wrongs done, as far as human power goes. Without this, though he appears to feel that he preaches to deaf ears, he is for ever insisting there is no real repentance. Latimer is a Protestant, then, because the moral aim

and character of the Christian message had been overlaid with corruptions and superstitions ; and he does not spare his own side when he sees lawlessness, selfishness, and greed masquerading under the pretext of zeal for the Gospel. A reformer of Latimer's moral earnestness could not but find his bitterest disappointments among "false Gospellers." Such was his Protestantism.

He was distinguished as a preacher from the first ; and a preacher before all things, a preacher of extraordinary power, he remained : perhaps the greatest popular preacher England has ever had. Violent he was sometimes in matter and manner ; but he illuminated all he said with a profound moral fervour, a profound knowledge of human nature, and an extraordinarily lively wit and fancy, which shrank from no "merry tale" which could illustrate in the pulpit or out of it what he wished to enforce. A real preacher, like his beloved St. Augustine, in eager response to the feelings of his hearers, speaking the language they understood with point and force, and repeating himself again and again till he had fixed what he wanted to say in the minds of his hearers. There is nothing stronger in English literature by way of moral invective than his sermon before the Convocation, and nothing more Christian in English preaching than his sermons on the Lord's Prayer.

He spent himself effectively in pastoral work when he held his country parish in Wiltshire ; and when he became Bishop of Worcester (in succession to a series of non-resident Italian bishops) he threw himself eagerly into the work of the diocese. He took great trouble to get good men promoted, and to extirpate abuses according to his lights. But he was bishop less than four years ; he was hampered during those years by money difficulties ("No man," he said, "having the name of so

many things hath the use of so few"); and doubtless he was not an administrator by nature. In the reaction towards the older style of doctrine and discipline which characterized the later years of Henry VIII, he resigned his bishopric and retired for a while into the background, till he came out again with renewed vigour as a preacher on the accession of Edward VI, and (refusing to resume his bishopric) remained a dominant influence as a preacher in the ranks of the extremest reformers till Mary's accession put the power again into the hands of his opponents, and he died a martyr to his convictions (just under the window of the room which I used to occupy in college at Oxford), with the great words to his companion in the flames—"Be of good courage, Master Ridley, and play the man: we shall this day light such a candle by God's grace in England as I trust shall never be put out."

I have done my best in a short compass to give you some account of the man whose memory and teaching this church is to recall to you. But, fresh as I am from the volumes which contain his writings and the records of his sermons which remain, I must come back to the chief general impression which they make. It is that Latimer was, among English Christian teachers, the prince of Christian socialists, the forerunner of the Maurices and Kingsleys and Westcotts of later days. Righteousness—righteousness as shown in personal life and social dealing, the social reforms which are necessary to vindicate and establish the righteousness among us in England, the motives and threatenings and encouragements which the doctrine of Christ supplies for one who hungers and thirsts after this righteousness—these things are first in his mind; they are continually recurring in his every sermon. He feels, as deeply as any man ever felt it, not that men are equal—he is no leveller—but

that in God's sight every man counts for one, and no man counts for more than one. The moral gain to common men and women—that is the standard by which he measures the value of religious activities: "The end of your Convocation," he says to that assembly of the clergy, "shall show what ye have done; the fruit that shall come of your consultation shall show of what generation ye be. For what have ye done hitherto, I pray? These seven years and more? What have ye engendered? What have ye brought forth? What fruit is come of your long and great assembly? What one thing that the people of England hath been the better of a hair? or you yourselves either more accepted before God, or better discharged towards the people committed to your care?"

And later, when the Reformation had gone further, he still challenges it by its moral fruits. The property of the monasteries ought to have gone to the furthering of education and the good of the people. But had it?—

"Abbeys were ordained for the comfort of the poor; therefore, I said, it was not decent that the King's horses should be kept in them, as many were at that time; the living of poor men thereby minished and taken away."

He saw Church property passing to the selfish use of the rich, and Church preferment made a matter of traffic, livings bought and sold as property: "O Lord," he cries, "in what case are we! If the great men in Turkey should use in their religion of Mahomet to sell, as our patrons commonly sell benefices here, the office of preaching, the office of salvation, it should be taken as an intolerable thing; the Turk would not suffer it in his commonwealth. Patrons be charged to see the office done, and not to seek a lucre or a gain by their patronship."

Latimer was afraid of no powerful person or interest. He speaks his mind boldly to Henry in his full power, and gives the plainest advice to the young Edward surrounded by his courtiers. Like John the Baptist he gives the simplest message of righteousness to every class of society: to nobles and magistrates, that they be accessible to the cares and needs of the poor lawyers and physicians, that they serve the poor as needs as the rich; to bishops and priests he delivers a plain message indeed. Before merchants and money-keepers he denounces in detail the dishonest trade, describing them so minutely, vividly, humorously that he begins to be afraid the innocent will learn craft from him. He speaks to parents and to children, to masters and to servants, of their mutual duties. He is impartial all round. "The servant who has his whole wages and does but half his work, or a sluggard, that same fellow, I say, is a thief before God." The profession of reformed opinions is of little avail against Latimer's keen shafts. "He was a Gospeller, one of the new brethren, somewhat worse than a rank Papist." We get a terrible picture of a country full of sin in Latimer's sermons—covetousness, fraud, irreverence, lust, and lying. He has the spirit of the Old Testament prophets in him. But it is not only denunciation which comes from his lips. He presents to us a noble positive ideal of social righteousness, based on faith in God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. He is no hard Puritan. He is for the consecration of all life, with its occupations and amusements; with all the members of the body, high and low, rich and poor, one with another co-operating for the good of the whole. No communist: he maintains stoutly the legal basis of private property, while he lays on all property the properly moral claim that it shall

be used for the good of the whole under the laws of God.

My brethren, I am thankful that the name of Hugh Latimer should be held in reverence amongst us through the building of this church. I fancy that there is a great weariness of doctrine that has no visible effect upon life. But I fancy that a Christian doctrine which is brought to bear powerfully and fully upon life, individual and social, a doctrine that strikes directly and forcibly for righteousness, a doctrine of the kingdom of Christ, full of sympathy for common human needs and full of indignation—of the fire of the Lord—against injustices and social wrongs, a doctrine of human brotherhood under Christ for our Captain—and what is all this but another name for scriptural doctrine?—for this, I fancy, there are hearts awake in all classes. We need a clergy to which, saturated in Scripture, bold as John the Baptist, fearless as he and unworldly as he, able to rebuke sin with power, and to show the way of righteousness, full of the spirit of brotherhood, knowing the human nature, the needs, the aspirations, the difficulties of common men, taking in the whole of life, to preach once again a Gospel for the poor, so that the power of the Spirit may win them again for Christ and for His Church.

A princely liberality has given you this church, and Hugh Latimer's name is named upon it. I would say, Be true to his spirit. Let his moral gospel be heard and felt here.



